

VIEWPOINTS

Lawmakers, don't squander chance to restore school funding

Gov. Dennis Daugaard has once again been the bearer of good news.

He first heightened optimism among South Dakotans in a press release issued way back in July, in which he informed the state's citizens that we, at that time, were in better financial shape than expected.

The state general fund budget for fiscal year 2013 ended with higher revenues and lower expenditures than budgeted.

Revenue growth for the completed 2013 fiscal year exceeded estimates adopted by the legislature last March by \$13.6 million. In addition, state agencies also demonstrated fiscal restraint, spending \$10.6 million less than appropriated.

In total, the state's financial picture improved by \$24.2 million from the March fiscal year 2013 estimates.

The \$24.2 million surplus was transferred to the budget reserve account as required by state law.

Fast forward to the present. Things can change rapidly in South Dakota, and as the governor prepared to give his annual budget address to the Legislature on Dec. 3, there were no great expectations.

Daugaard had warned earlier that lackluster tax receipts would hold education-funding increases to around 1.6 percent, the minimum bump for inflation that state law requires for school aid. But he told state lawmakers on Dec. 3 that an unexpected \$70 million in unclaimed property receipts — money the state gets from bank accounts and other property whose owners cannot be found — will allow 3 percent increases in school aid, payments to health care providers in the Medicaid program and other key programs.

BETWEEN THE LINES



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The news is enough to put a spring in one's step. As we look ahead with a new sense of optimism, however, we shouldn't ignore one simple fact: South Dakota has had the means to more adequately fund education for some time now.

Our Republican Legislature, however, stubbornly clings to state dollars, directing them, at times, to projects that are somewhat questionable while forcing school district to scrape and slash while trying their best to keep everyone happy.

We'll repeat observations we made back in July, because we believe this information is important as a new session of the South Dakota Legislature approaches next month.

Last July, the state's two rainy-day accounts reached a combined record high of \$158,952,076.

That total of nearly \$159 million is equal to 12.3 percent of state government's general-fund spending from the 2013 budget.

All of that revenue didn't just suddenly appear out of thin air. There are a host of things at work here, including a high reliance by the state on a strongly regressive tax.

The Republican governor also proposed a 3 percent raise for state employees and a 3 percent hike in spending on South Dakota's four technical institutes.

Another factor is the ease with which the state Legislature has, for two years in a row now, not only balanced its budget but also had plenty of money left over in its general fund and in reserve funds.

One reason the state's ledger ends up in the black is the state legislature's willingness to shift many financial burdens onto citizens' shoulders in a variety of ways.

An example: For years, now, the Legislature hasn't adequately funded public education in South Dakota. It has ignored South Dakota law that calls for state aid to education to increase annually by 3 percent or the rate of inflation, which ever is less.

Gov. Mike Rounds, in his last year in office, called for a freeze in state aid, and the Legislature agreed. During Daugaard's first year as governor, it looked like schools would be hit with a 10 percent cut in funding. One-time monies were found to make that cut approximately 7 percent.

School districts have yet to recover from the double-whammy caused by the recession and state budget cuts.

The Associated School Boards of South Dakota (ASBSD) will be attempting this legislative session to bring funding to at least where it was three years ago.

"We're still working toward a goal that we asked him for and the Legislature for, and that's to get you folks back to a per student allocation of \$4,805," Wade Pognay, executive director of the ASBSD, told the Vermillion School Board Monday night.

That amount — \$4,805 — represents the amount of state aid per student to bring public school districts back to the funding levels

before Daugaard made drastic cuts to the state budget early in his first term. Public school funding was decreased 8.6 percent.

"We think it's important now, after these three years, that we restore that, to get back to that, if not exceed that," he said. "My board and the delegates clearly said we need to try to persuade our legislators to achieve that level. I'm glad the governor has moved us in that direction."

Pognay said to achieve the \$4,805 per student funding level, the Legislature would need to increase funding eight-tenths of one percent above what the governor is proposing.

We understand the desire to have a "cushion," in our state budget. It's natural to be happy about having a positive balance in our bank accounts, and a wallet that's has a bit of heft to it. Yes, we're glad that South Dakota, as of last July, had a \$24.2 million surplus in its state budget. It's difficult to be disappointed in last July's news that the state's reserve funds have reached a record high of nearly \$159 million.

Reserve funds, however, have a disappointing quality. They just sit there. Their potential to further improve our state, to make needed investments in the public good, go wasted.

So, the money has always had to come from somewhere else.

Patrons of a growing number of public school districts across the state, frustrated with the state's unwillingness to fund public schools adequately, have had to raise needed revenue themselves by opting out of the state property tax freeze.

Of South Dakota's 151 public school districts, 66 have opted out, raising additional revenue to pay for salaries and other ongoing general fund costs. The Vermillion School District is in the midst of its second five-year opt-out that provides \$800,000 annually.

Our state wallet may have grown fat recently, but it's done so at the expense of other programs and other citizens in our state. The examples we've offered are just in the field of education (by the way, tuition at state universities, including USD, increased about 4 percent for the 2013-14 school year — another burden the state easily passed on to others).

We hope state lawmakers will take that all into account as they soon will be asked to restore school funding to where it was three years ago. We realize that the governor's plan includes tapping into a quite a bit of money he wasn't expecting to have — namely, a windfall in unclaimed property payments to give bigger-than-expected spending increases for schools, health care for poor people and pay raises for state employees.

We hope the governor and lawmakers remember, however, that South Dakotans' hard work, sacrifice, their doing without, their paying more than should be required in local, highly regressive property and sales taxes and fees and tuition have helped make those spending increases possible.

Hopefully they'll agree that adding less than one percent — one-eighth of one percent, to be precise, to the governor's proposed education funding amount — isn't asking for too much.

PLAIN TALK POLL RESULTS

Should an independent review of the Governor's Office of Economic Development and its involvement with a federal investor-immigration program and Northern Beef Packers be held?

Yes	49
Undecided	10
No	6
Total Votes	65

To participate in the Plain Talk's weekly poll, log on to plaintalk.net.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

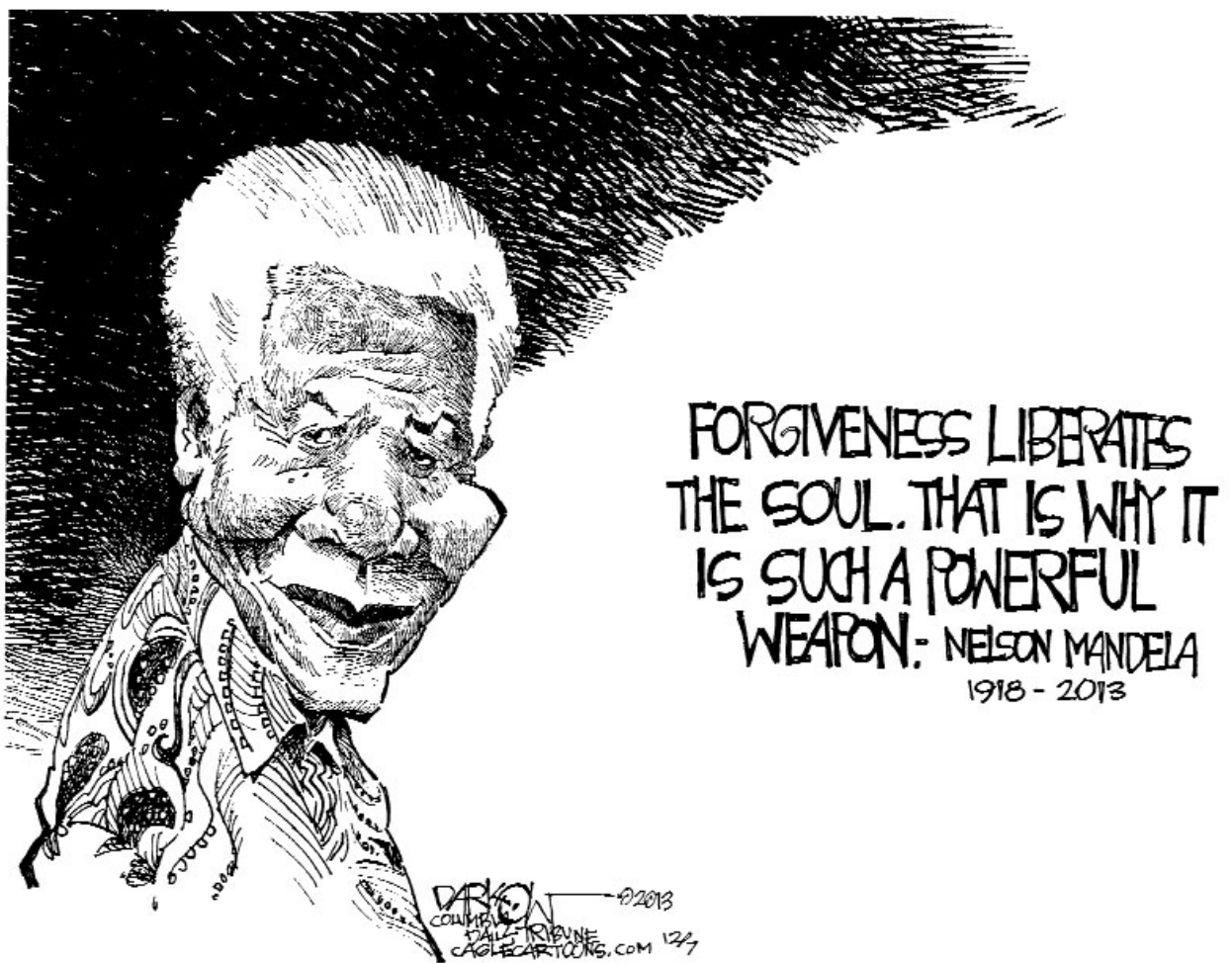
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Please limit letters to 300 words or less. Letters are edited with brevity, clarity and newspaper style in mind.

In the sense of fairness and professionalism, the *Plain Talk* will accept no

letters attacking private individuals or businesses.

Only signed letters with writer's full name, address and daytime phone number for verification will be accepted. Mail to: Letters to the Editor, 201 W. Cherry St., Vermillion, SD 57069, drop off at 201 W. Cherry in Vermillion or e-mail to david.lias@plaintalk.net.



Damon: On defying the Christmas blues

"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." C. S. Lewis, writer and theologian

Dec. 5, 2013

"Are you ready for Christmas?" a Wal-Mart clerk asked me while I was scanning holiday lights at the self-checkout counter. I was on a quick stop before my Zoomba exercise class at 5:45 p.m. And honestly, I thought it was way too soon to be asking that question of anyone, especially me.

"Not even close," I chuckled, somewhat defiantly. "How about you," I slyly retorted, using a back-at-you tone. "Are you ready for Christmas?"

"I'm ready for it to be over!" the clerk spouted adamantly with a hint of fatigue in her voice.

"Really, so soon?" I asked, quite surprised. And then it dawned on me — suffer the poor souls in retail who have been staring down "holly jolly" since

MY STORY YOUR STORY



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before Halloween.

"Well, it all depends on how much I can get done on my day off tomorrow," came her calculated response.

"There's way too much pressure this time of year, don't you think?" I asked rhetorically.

Shaking her head in agreement, she catapulted into a litany of people and gifts remaining on her list.

It did not take me long to realize that she could use an attentive ear, and for some strange and wonderful reason, she had chosen me. So, I did my Christmas spirit best to multitask between the talking

cash register's repeated recant of, "Insert cash or select payment type" and this dark-haired fair-skinned store employee, full to overflowing with what became a nagging interior sorrow.

As her narrative unfolded, she centered on Grandma, who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

"She's having difficulty putting names with faces." The clerk's eyes searched me, almost beggar like. "So, I'm making her an album with photos of all her grandchildren. And, I'm going to write our names underneath to help her remember." She proceeded to delineate who's who in the descendent line with her hands drawing names in air laced with mingling aromas of fresh baked bread, popcorn and deli fried chicken.

After recounting through watery eyes examples of the piecemeal destruction the disease

rendered, the clerk mentioned her grandfather's new role of filling in the blanks for his wife's failure to recall.

The young woman's pale face reddened.

"That's what I want to do," she sighed, "but I'm not sure if I'll have enough time to finish it."

"Your grandmother is very fortunate to have a granddaughter as thoughtful and caring as you," I remarked.

Her face beamed while her eyes remained affixed to mine. All the noise and chaos of "Wally-World" faded in the background. Conflicted, I was torn between making it to my class on time and realizing this dear one wasn't quite finished yet.

Leaning into my hard-boiled determination to not be late, I slowly side-stepped toward the exit, blessing her as I shuffled away with "Have a very merry Christmas." This regrettably came off as quite trite.

"You, too," she said, half-smiling, her face tightened and then quickly cast a lonesome glance back to her jurisdiction of aisles, which were still churning with exhaustive frenzy.

Hurrying to my car, I reminded myself that there's no such thing as a quick stop at Wal-Mart, where any number of distractions can waylay the best intentions to get in and out. Never did I expect my delay to be a check-out clerk who really needed someone to listen — a shoulder on which to lean, maybe even grieve.

I plan to return to that store, and with any luck she'll be working. This time, I'll shift my focus from me to her, concentrating less on what I need to do and more on what she needs me to do.

I'll try to do a better job of being a courier of glad tidings.

After all, it is Christmas.

Vermillion

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